

BY LUKE SLATTERY
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To reach the headquarters of the ISIS Group you venture down a narrow alley in the inner Sydney suburb of Rozelle and vault up a flight of steps. "ISIS: Uganda, Nepal, United Kingdom, USA, Bermuda, Australia" reads the sign at the door. What could possibly unite such disparate destinations? Audette Exel is the simple answer.

I'm a little early for our chat and catch the University of Melbourne-trained international finance lawyer padding around the office of the unique business-for-purpose venture she started in 1998 – a global commercial business that feeds a philanthropic organisation focused on Nepal and Uganda – in bare

feet. She heads off to slip into something less comfortable and returns atop high heels. Around the oval wooden table of a meeting room whose bookshelves are lined with guides to far-flung places and biographies of moral heroes such as Nelson Mandela, she explains the yin and yang principles that form the ISIS Group.

The company has a business face, ISIS (Asia Pacific), and a philanthropic face, ISIS Foundation, and both are united in common purpose: to help support the poor in remote regions of the developing world. Exel is Chief Executive of the former, Chair of the latter. Her stated aim is to "have the world of business hold hands with the world of development," and in this she has been strikingly successful.

She needs to earn more than \$100,000 a month, she says, to keep the motor of the charity, which directly and indirectly

employs more than 140 people, purring along. A mere 10 staff are employed on the business side, though as Exel's core skill is international finance she does much of the lifting herself. Her financial expertise is put to use advising banks on, as she puts it, "buying and selling each other and how to invest hundreds of millions of dollars".

By her reckoning about 30,000 people are benefiting from the Foundation's assistance. "We don't fund grants, we do our own work in teams on the ground," she says. "And we are known the world over for our remote work. Our most remote service was 25 days' walk from the road when we began working there 16 years ago."

Most of this work targets the health and education of women and young children, including early school education and the fight against child trafficking. The virtuous circle linking both the finance and humanitarian facets of ISIS puts a smiling public face on the banking sector, a rarity this side of the global financial crisis, and it produces some nice ironies.

Exel closed a deal last December that earned \$2 million in advisor's fees for ISIS. "People in Uganda and Nepal, all over the world, were celebrating a US private equity fund," she recalls. "I suppose that's unheard of."

Asked why her efforts are focused on isolated communities abroad when there are so many remote Aboriginal communities closer to home in distress, she has a ready answer to what is

doubtless an often-asked question: "If I had all the hours in the day and all the money in the world there's so much need on the planet that I don't know where to start."

She agrees that Indigenous communities are in need of support, as are refugees. "I think refugees are heroes. But what I say about giving is that everyone should follow his or her passion. It doesn't matter if it's environment activism or work for children in poverty. For me the most vulnerable people in the world, the people who get me up every day, are women and children in extreme poverty, in remote places. There's a Jewish saying

that if you save a life you save a world. I profoundly believe that and my motto is: just do something."

The backstory of this Kiwi-born and philanthropically oriented global finance whizz is every bit as interesting as her day-to-day work. As she tells it, her first three years of university, in New Zealand, came to an abrupt end when she was injured in a skydiving accident in Australia. Unable to return for treatment because of the New Zealand accident compensation system, she applied to

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A gift for giving

Audette Exel has deployed her skill in global finance to help the poor in the world's remotest areas.

The people business: Audette Exel in Kathmandu with two of the children her ISIS Foundation has rescued.